



## **Response to the question “Are the Blue Dogs Leading the Democratic Party in the Right Direction?”**

*By Representative Peter DeFazio (D-OR)*

It is a sad commentary on the state of public policy discourse when a political party believes it must act and sound like its major competitor in order to win elections. Yet, that is exactly what the conservative wing of the Democratic Party – the Blue Dogs – and the slightly more moderate wing – the New Democrats – argue should be done. On behalf of the Democratic wing of the Democratic party, I respectfully disagree.



Where is the competition in politics that is so prized by free market ideologues? Rather than giving Americans a distinct choice (which voters historically had), the Blue Dogs and Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) members prefer to blur the differences between the two major parties, abandon core Democratic constituencies, principles and programs, chase the same corporate campaign money, and appeal to the same voters as the Republican party.

I believe shifting the positions of the Democratic party so they resemble those of moderate Republicans represents a miscalculation of election results, a misreading of public opinion, and a misunderstanding of the daily struggle of the vast majority of Americans.

One of the common refrains coming from my conservative colleagues is voters are increasingly affluent, wired to the Internet, and well-educated. Therefore, they argue, Democrats must drop progressive, populist positions and adopt positions deemed to be more acceptable to this block of voters. However, census voter survey data, which is more accurate than exit polls for evaluating electorate demographics, paints a different portrait of the electorate. This data shows 42 percent of voters had a high school degree or less while 29 percent had “some college.” Together, these numbers represent a supermajority of voters without a four-year college degree. Too often Blue Dog proposals don’t address the concerns of these Americans.

Even if one accepts the dubious premise of an increasingly affluent, wired, and educated electorate, is this trend because Americans as a whole have become more educated and affluent or is it because those who aren’t have dropped out of the electoral arena all together since elected officials are not speaking to, or acting on, the challenges they face? If it’s the latter (as it likely is), does it really make sense for the Democratic party to abandon its historic commitment to economic and social justice for the middle-class, the working poor, minorities, seniors, and children? Of course not. Wouldn’t it make as much, or more, sense to try to bring the 50 percent of Americans who don’t vote and who, demographics suggest, would vote primarily Democratic, back into the fold?

It is not healthy for our democracy when the two major parties merely engage in a tug-of-war over a shrinking pool of voters while ignoring the concerns of millions of Americans who have dropped out of the process because they no longer believe government operates of, by and for the people.

The pronounced rightward drift of the Democratic party since Clinton's election in 1992 has not been the electoral success its proponents claim. In fact, other than Democrats winning the White House, it's been a complete failure. Democrats have lost both chambers of Congress. Twenty eight Democratic governors have been whittled down to eighteen. Democratic control of state legislatures dropped from 25 to 16, while Republican control jumped from eight to 17. Ignoring key constituencies will not improve those numbers.

Vice President Al Gore would not have won the popular vote in the presidential election, and many Members of Congress would not be in office, were it not for the strong support of core progressive constituencies. Blacks supported Gore by an overwhelming margin of 90 to 8 percent. Hispanics, who Republicans actively courted, supported Gore 67 to 31 percent. Union households overlooked being repeatedly slapped by the Clinton/Gore administration in pursuit of global corporate trade deals and gave Gore nearly 60 percent of the union vote. Combining the Gore and Ralph Nader vote leads to the inescapable conclusion that for the first time since 1964, a majority of the American people voted for a perceived center-left candidate, Gore, or a true left candidate, Nader, for president. Even Marshall Wittman of the conservative Hudson Institute acknowledged this inconvenient fact for Blue Dog Democrats when he said "The left won this election. If you add the votes of Nader to Gore, you have a majority electorate."

One need only look at Gore's jump in support following his convention speech, which was widely regarded as his most progressive, populist appeal of the entire campaign. Based on the strength of that single appeal, Gore moved from a double-digit deficit to a 4-8 point lead depending on the poll cited.

Clearly, the Democratic party cannot abandon its base. There are not enough uncommitted voters available to make up for large defections from the Democratic base should conservative Democrats continue to join Republicans in pursuing policies to dismantle the social safety net, increase the regressivity of the tax code, or export good U.S. jobs overseas.

It will first be necessary for Democrats, particularly conservatives, to break free of the simplistic assumption that the overriding desire of all Americans is to get rid of "Big Government." A 1999 study for the non-partisan Woodrow Wilson Center by Albert Cantril and Susan Davis Cantril found that when asked their opinion about government in general Americans often expressed antipathy toward it. However, when asked about specific things the government does, many of these same individuals expressed strong support. This led the researchers to conclude that a sizeable segment of the American public were "ideological conservatives", but "operational liberals." On issue after issue - Head Start, safe working conditions, housing assistance, and clean air standards - Americans supported government action virtually irrespective of their attitude toward government in the abstract. These conclusions are consistent with a similar groundbreaking study by Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril in 1964.

Government cannot and should not be all things to all people. But, Americans recognize there are occasions when free markets do not address their concerns. In poll after poll, and study after study, large swaths of the American public support initiatives that bear a distinctly traditional Democratic stamp.

A study by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), which is affiliated with the University of Maryland, found Americans overwhelmingly support the progressive Democratic vision for international trade. Ninety-three percent agreed that "countries that are part of international trade agreements should be required to maintain minimum standards for working conditions." Seventy-four percent feel countries should be able to restrict imports if they are

produced in a way that damages the environment, and 80 percent said that “American companies that operate in other countries should be expected to abide by U.S. environmental standards.” Similarly, research released by the Center on Policy Attitudes (CPA) in November 1999 found 83 percent of Americans agreed trade should be balanced with other goals, such as protecting workers, the environment, and human rights - even if that meant lowering the growth of trade and the economy.

Progressive Democrats are also right in line with voters’ concerns about unaccountable corporate power. A survey in the September 11, 2000 issue of Business Week magazine found nearly three-quarters of Americans think corporations have “gained too much power over too many aspects of their lives” and believe that “big companies have too much political influence.” Sixty six percent think “large profits are more important to big companies than developing safe, reliable, quality products for consumers” and only 47 percent think that “what’s good for business is good for most Americans.”

By wide margins, the American public also supports a reordering of federal budget priorities like those proposed in the alternative budget offered by the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC). The CPC budget provided substantial increases for social investment while remaining balanced and paying off the national debt by 2013. An October 1999 study for Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities found nearly 70 percent of respondents disagreed with federal spending priorities that allocate more than 50 cents of every discretionary dollar to the Pentagon. Even when presented with arguments about rising terrorism and other threats, voters supported a hypothetical candidate who prioritized education and health care by a nearly 2 to 1 margin. Fewer than 1 in 10 voters agreed with the current military spending levels. The conclusion of the report stated emphatically that “independent voters, men and women alike, consistently choose the pro-domestic investment candidate over a pro-military investment candidate, regardless of wording.” Further, “support for shifting military spending to state and local domestic priorities exists in every region.”

A similar study by the CPA in September 2000 found that voters would allocate the federal budget pie much differently than those they elect to represent them in Washington, D.C. The respondents favored prudent reductions in military spending and substantial increases for education, environmental protection, and job training, among other areas.

While rushing to parrot Republican rhetoric and co-opt Republican “solutions”, too many Democrats have bought into the idea that all Americans are doing well because of the so-called new economy. The data reveal a different picture. Much of the income growth over the last ten years is attributable to an increasing number of hours worked per family. American families now work six full time weeks a year more than in 1989. After more than two decades where wages were stagnant or declining, average annual wages have finally begun increasing faster than inflation for lower and middle-income Americans, but the Federal Reserve’s higher interest rate strategy may choke off this positive development. Despite a decade of economic growth, poverty remains at 12.7 percent, just one-tenth of a percentage point less than in 1989 and a full point higher than in 1979. Poverty rates for African-Americans and Hispanics are even worse, 26.1 percent and 25.6 percent respectively. Income and wealth inequality in the U.S. is already the worst among industrialized nations and continues to grow.

Even the booming stock market would not be a savior for most Americans. Less than half of households hold stock in any form, including mutual funds and 401(k)s. Of those that do, 64 percent have stock holdings worth less than \$5,000. The top one percent of stock holders own 47.7 percent of all stocks while the bottom 80 percent own just 4.1 percent. Stock market gains have been similarly concentrated at the top.

The Democratic party would gain by focusing primarily on kitchen table economic issues like education, health care, and tax relief for lower and middle-income Americans. However, the party should not be afraid to differentiate itself from Republican approaches. After all, if negotiations only include the conservative Blue Dog Democrats and the Republican party under its right-wing leadership, then it is inevitable the compromise will be somewhere to the right of center, public opinion notwithstanding.

My own experience in the fourth district of Oregon provides evidence for broad public support for a progressive, populist approach to public policy regardless of ideology or political affiliation. I consistently have supported such an agenda and have been rewarded with large margins of victory. In the most recent election, Bush handily won my district. At the same time, I won every county in the fourth district and out-pollled Gore by more than 30 percentage points in the most conservative county. I recognize that strategy and positioning that works in one district may not work in another. Nevertheless, the relentless push to refashion the Democratic party as a slightly more compassionate Republican party will do little to recruit voters to the party and will not lead to enlightened public policy.

The bottom line is the Democratic Party can, and should, appeal to its base and reach out to other voters by articulating and acting on the core Democratic agenda. These are not mutually exclusive goals. Polls show traditional Democratic voters, and those the Blue Dogs and the DLCers want to reach, care about the same issues and support similar solutions.